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Unfettered hope: a call to faithful living in an affluent society

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resourceful way, the text lists six pages of texts for further reading on leadership qualities, practices and wisdoms. This is a helpful text on spirituality and leadership. It needs to be read by those who are leaders and by those who aspire to leadership.

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Unfettered Hope

Marva J. Dawn

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003

216 pages, \$19.57 Softcover

The tragedies of September 11, 2001 have dramatically changed the world, perhaps forever. There is much in this post-September 11 world which is experienced as puzzling, burdensome and overwhelming. We wonder: How do we make sense of all that happened on that day? And since that day? Marva Dawn, through her perceptive social analysis and theological reflection, notes that people are yearning for an “unfettered hope” but what they experience frequently is a “fettered hope.” Many are they who become sadly and deeply disillusioned and disappointed!

In the “Introduction” the author clearly identifies how she uses the words “the fettering of human hope.” Says she: “In this book, I am using the image of fettering to summarize the many ways that our feelings of hope might be stifled or squashed, that our hopes in the form of a possible event might be prevented or spoiled, that our hope for a condition in the world might be thwarted or restricted, or that our hopes in things or people might be disappointed or disillusioned ... I want to demonstrate the unique and unfettered hope of the Christian faith. Moreover, I believe that hope in the Triune God gives us the means for dealing with the diverse fetherings in our lives and frees us to be engaged in counteracting the fetherings of violence and injustice in our world.” (xii)

Marva Dawn, theologian-educator with Christians Equipped for Ministry, in Vancouver, Washington, and Teaching Fellow in Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, notes with theologian

Douglas John Hall that there are two different despairs in the modern world: “the overt despair of members of affluent societies, whose hopeless situations lead them to resort to crime, violence, substance abuse, or suicide and covert despair of those who repress their hopelessness.” (xv-xvi) Wonders Dawn: “How has the world become so unbalanced that part of the world struggles to cope with all the stuff it possesses while the larger part of the world scrambles to find enough? How have citizens of the richer nations lost the ability to choose, to limit their consumption, to question the commodities and technologies of their milieu? Why does the technological society overwhelm us with its speed of change, its tempo of activity, its plethora of possibilities, its glut of information? Why, with all our technological and consumer capabilities, do we feel more burdened than ever?” (41)

In the first two chapters, Dawn provides a perceptive, provocative and prophetic “multi-media collage” through which she identifies some of what fetters our hopes. She does so through down-to-earth analytical questions like: “Why does the technological milieu make us feel overloaded and overwhelmed?” “Does the computer really save us time and money?” “Do I really need all this stuff?” “How do I cope with being left behind?” “Is faster always better?” “Is the answer always more?” “Do we understand that violence is often a result of economic injustice?” “I pray,” says Dawn, “that recognizing the depth of our enslavement will propel us all to renewed efforts to make appropriate choices for our own good and the good of others in the world.” (1)

In the post-September 11, 2001 world, we often do feel overwhelmed. We experience troublesome, disturbing and debilitating despair. We are quite fearful of a daunting future. Dawn believes that much of this malaise is due to a variety of factors – there is dire despair in the world where a wealthy minority consumes most of the earth’s goods; there is an informational despair which rises from a dependence on modern technology, a shaping of reality by what Dawn calls “the device paradigm”; there is a reliance on things – on devices as commodities – to give us hope only to find again and again a major disillusionment. In the midst of all these monumental despairs, Dawn wonders: “Is there no source of genuine hope by which to surmount our despair? Could such a genuine hope give us the courage to let the despair remain visible long enough to probe its

deeper roots?" (xvii) She responds to her own wonderments with: "It is my primary thesis ... that Christianity provides focal concerns worthy of our creation as human beings and efficacious for dealing with the encroachments and fetherings of our technologized, commodified milieu." (76) "I believe that the focal concerns of Christianity ... are these two: the love of God and the love of the neighbor." (76)

"The question is, are churches ready to help people – members and seekers and even non-interested neighbors – ask deeper questions about what overwhelms them, about the nature of our society, about who God is and who we are in response to God at this place and this time in history?" (79) Too often the church gets mired in a "preservative mode" rather than energized by an "outreach mission" approach. Too often the church is satisfied with platitudes that are non-disturbing and non-threatening rather than engaging and prophetic in the midst of troublesome questions, issues or concerns arising from experiences in a bewildering world.

Not only is the narrative of this text brilliantly put forward in helping us identify what constitutes "focal concerns" in our personal and church lives and faith journeys, but within the text itself there are many helpful footnotes, usually identifying related "books for further reading." "Works Cited For Further Study," a bibliography that covers six printed pages, is a treasured resource. These references alone are worth the cost of the book!

I appreciate Marva Dawn's writings. This is an excellent volume, one that I am adding as recommended reading in two courses I teach in Contextual Ministry. This energizingly creative and provocatively engaging text deserves a careful and reflective reading by seminarians, clergy and laity – especially all who are interested to correlate revelatory faith and searching world through significant processes of meaning-making.

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